Nº I. — XVII.

THE THEATRICAL

CENSOR.

BY AN AMERICAN.

"Aimez qu'on vous corrige, et non pas qu'on vous loue."

BOILEAU.

"If we offend, it is with our good-will.
"That you should think we come not to offend,
"But with good-will. . . . . .

MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM.

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PHILADELPHIA, DEC. 9, 1805.

AMONGST the happiest inventions of genius may be classed Scenic Compositions. The aim of the muse was admirably advanced, when, to language and the lyre, she added the powers and charms of action.

This species of amusement, however, if improperly managed, is a certain source of evil. To make it useful, "we must shew virtue her own feature," vice her deformity. We must "hold the mirror up to nature," and renounce the trash which has so long sullied the pages of the drama.

The stage is the direct School of Vice, when it presents immoral scenes, when it utters base and corrupt sentiments, under the specious semblance of candour and truth. It becomes a nuisance to society, when a false taste presides over its representations; when the passions are caricatured, when manners are miscopied, when its language is barbarous, its pronunciations vicious, or its delivery vulgar.

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But, under proper management, the stage becomes the School of Virtue, the School of Manners, the Great School of Society. In it is taught whatever is interesting not only to man, but to civilized man. It teaches all that ennobles, all that embellishes human life. It teaches all the decencies of public and private intercourse. It is the School of Morals; it is the School of Arts; it is the School of Language; it is the School of *Piety*.

> Publica privatis secernere, sacra profanis;
> Concubitu prohibere vago; dare jura maritis.

For the beneficial direction of these advantages on whom must we depend? On the manager. On him devolves the responsibility, the credit, or the discredit. His is the satisfaction in the just and careful discharge of his duty; of the enviable consciousness that his private views are accomplished with public advantage, and that while he enriches himself, he is bestowing an invaluable treasure on his fellow-citizens, on the state. He knows that he is ameliorating and polishing his age and country; and his reward extends far beyond the increased weight of his well-lined purse. He enjoys not only the praise and sanction of persons of taste and letters, but the good wishes of the philosopher—the gratitude of the legislator. With so many noble objects before his eyes, his efforts should be unceasing, as his reward will be glorious.

A manager, however, is seldom in a situation to make his will his sole guide. His condition is somewhat similar to that of what are called absolute monarchs, but who wear the chains of popular opinion; who may, indeed, make and unmake the attendants in their antichambers, but who would risk their existence if they attempted the subversion of established and general customs. The public, in the final resort, govern the stage. First, the public forms the stage; then the stage forms the public; and again the public directs the stage. The manager must produce what the public will sit to hear. He must engage those actors and actresses whom the public applaud; and

Such plays alone should please 'the public' ear
As Cato's self would not disdain to hear.

And what is a critic? One of the public, who expresses audibly his opinion, and endeavours to make it that of the majority. His aim is the perfection of the art, the reputation of the manager and performers, and the benefit of the public. Is he the enemy of the drama? Far from it. He delights in it; he enjoys its honors, he resents its injuries; he laments when it is disgraced. Is he the enemy of the theatre? No. He strives to make it an object of attention; to multiply its attractions; to purge away its defects. Is he the enemy of the performer? Yes: of that performer who neglects his profession; who disfigures the stage; who occupies a station to which he is inadequate. But, of genius, and the performer who studies to deserve the wreath, is he the enemy? No: he is his active friend; he calls aloud for the general acknowledgment of his merit; he points out his particular excellences; he labors, perhaps, to rescue him from neglect, and lead him out of the shadow of some dull, but more fortunate, rival;—and though not the most gracious of his undertakings, he strives to cure him of his faults.

Is he the enemy of the public? Would he proscribe its amusements, or damp its pleasures? He defends, he partakes of the former, and his efforts are the increase of the latter. Is he an ill-humoured caviller? Is he unwilling to be pleased, or to let others be so? Are his criticisms unfounded? Are his opinions false, his taste gross or fantastic? Is he ignorant of what he sets up to judge? If so, pass him by; if he murmur, never heed him: and, for his writings, they will repose in "the tomb of all the Capulets."

But if his judgment be sane, his purpose is certainly estimable. He is the voice of an enlightened audience; he demands in their name that the ear shall not be offended by those who found their claims on giving it pleasure; that the productions of transcendant genius shall not be so represented

as to sully their glory; that elocution and language shall not be debased, where models will necessarily be taken; and finally, that the feelings of the audience shall not be insulted, nor youth misled, where, under a salutary regimen, the best affections will be cherished and the purest lessons inculcated. Such are the demands of every discerning auditor.

These, then, are the pretensions of criticism; these are its objects: and their utility no man will deny. Dramatic criticism never wanted the support of the lovers of the drama; and the list of subscribers to this little work sufficiently proves that there is no deficiency of taste for theatrical amusements on this side the Atlantic.

Monday Evening, Dec. 2, 1805.

THE Theatre was crowded at an early hour, to witness the representation of "The West Indian" and "The Quaker:" the latter cautiously wrapped up in the title of "May-Day Dower, or the Benevolent Friend." The play, with the exception of a few passages, does honour to the choice of the manager; but the after-piece, although replete with excellent music, and in other respects not entirely void of attraction, we sincerely wish may never be repeated. It is lamentable that its authors should have displayed so much talent on a performance, the direct object of which is to throw into ridicule a body of men, whose manners, although singular, are entitled to the utmost respect, whose indefatigable exertions civilized our country, and whose universal benevolence still furnishes our greatest comforts. It may be said that the *upright* character of *Steady* is calculated to reflect honor on the Quakers rather than odium; but the extravagant mummery of *Solomon* destroys whatever good effects may have been intended to his fraternity.

In perusing the play with attention, we find that its representation suffered much from curtailment; the cast of characters was not arranged with judgment; and the scenery was awkwardly managed. The latter, perhaps, might have arisen from the unavoidable bustle of a first night's performance.

Mr. Warren's *Stockwell* was admirable. We would, however, suggest to that excellent performer, the impropriety of endeavouring to appear *young*, as the respectable father of *Belcour*. The sprucely cropped hair, and shirt-collar exposed above the cravat, do not well accord with the character of a London merchant, of the supposed age of *Stockwell*. But, excepting two or three instances, Mr. Warren's performance was characterized by a strict attention to his author's meaning, by an affecting display of the united passions of the father and the friend, and by a chaste and elegant pronunciation. But, in the second act, where, in the ebullition of parental fondness, he unintentionally uses the word *father*, the recollection of his mistake was not sufficiently marked; and, in the last scene, the discovery of himself was too tame and mechanical.

If Mr. Wood could correct his monotonous delivery, and desist from certain distortions of the countenance, which are foreign to the passions he would express, we might again delight to see him in *Belcour*. He may, perhaps, exclaim, "if "this is folly in me, you must rail at Nature." We would answer, "Necessity, perhaps, will stand your friend, and you'll "reform."

Murdering a part is a well-known theatrical phrase. We never saw it more fully exemplified than in the representative of *Charles Dudley*. He seemed

"To dumb forgetfulness a prey."

Of the rest, "if we imagine no worse of them than they of "themselves, they may pass for excellent men."

Miss Rusport was tolerably performed by Mrs. Wood. The company might certainly have furnished a better *Louisa Dudley* than Mrs. Jefferson. But that she is one of our countrywomen, we might say more; and she is indebted for our dis-

covering her to be an American, to the *mai-an* that beset her in the streets. "As I live, the very *mai-an* that beset me in "the streets." Vide *West Indian*, *Act* iv, *Sc.* iv.

The *Major O'Flaherty* of Mr. Cross was well conceived, but badly performed. This is not the line in which he is likely to succeed.

Wednesday Evening, Dec. 4.

"THE CARMELITE," AND "RAISING THE WIND."

THE tragedy of the Carmelite is one of those productions which depend for their interest entirely on the merit of the performers. It received from Mrs. Melmoth a richness of colouring which we were not led to expect. Her voice is melodious, her gesticulation dignified, her countenance expressive. *The Lady of St. Valori* was all that we could wish:

> Falseggiando i dolcissimi sospiri,
> E i soavi singulti, e i vaghi pianti;
> Tal che incauta pietade a quei martirj
> Intenerir potea gli aspri diamanti.

Mr. Wood, to the defects noticed in the former article, here added an unusual swell of "inexplicable dumb shew and noise," which tortured wofully "the ears of the groundlings." He had totally forgotten that "in the very whirlwind of the passions," a "temperance" must be observed, to "give it smoothness;" that the straining of the voice, until it rise to a shrill treble, is unnatural, insupportable.

On the first view of Mr. Rutherford from the Charleston Theatre, we ventured to exclaim with Lafeu, "There can be no kernel in this light nut; the soul of this man is in his clothes;" Our opinion was eventually justified.

"Raising the Wind" went off with the usual *éclats* of roaring and laughter. Jefferson cannot fail to please if he confine himself to this line of comedy; and we may venture to pronounce, that, as a low comedian, he ranks very little below the greatest favorites of Covent-Garden or Old Drury.

Blisset deserves our praise. It is our fervent wish that he be kept as much off the *shelf* as possible. His Yorkshireman, by the by, seemed to have acquired his knowledge of rustic manners and language in Somersetshire.

It is our intention to enter hereafter more fully into the merits and demerits of each performer; and, to that effect, another number of this work will be published on Thursday next (when Friday's performance will be noticed) and thenceforward twice a week (Monday and Thursday) during the season.

Before we close our observations for this week, however, we must declare that if the performers take as much pains to improve themselves as the managers have taken to procure and keep them, we shall soon receive much gratification in visiting the theatre. The *by play* is not sufficiently attended to. Amongst other instances, which we would willingly enumerate at present, we have to mention one in particular, which was too glaring to be overlooked by the most inattentive. During the interesting scene, in the "Soldier's Daughter," on Friday evening, where Ferret, confessing his crimes, makes restitution for them, in some measure, by leaving his property to the brother of *Widow Cheerly*, three of the Dramatis Personæ (Messrs. Cain and M'Kenzie and Mrs. Jefferson) had placed themselves like statues, in a retired part of the stage, *expressively* gaping at the audience in the gallery. Mr. Cain's acting, generally, on that evening, however, removed our dislike to him on Wednesday, in *Charles Dudley*. He is possessed of talents, and we trust he will no longer forget to use them.

We shall be found much readier to praise than to condemn; but flagrant improprieties, in speech or action, will seldom escape our observation and animadversion. Performers should recollect that it is not speech alone that will make them great. The true language of nature is Action; this, if studied with attention, is understood in all countries; and this it was that

gave Garrick so decided a preference over all his brethren of the stage.*

The Editor of a French Journal, who, without understanding our language, went to *see* the play on Monday, observes, " Les rôles comiques, en général, sont mieux joués que les sérieux. Les amoureux sont fort embarrassés de leurs mains, et font des gestes si démesurés, que les personnes qui n'entendent pas parfaitement la langue, ne sont jamais certaines si ce sont des expressions de tendresse ou de fureur qu'ils débitent à leurs maîtresses. Les femmes sont moins gênées dans leurs manières, et si elles n'avaient pas un organe nazillard et fatiguant, elles seraient fort supportables." *Pet. Cens.*

* When Garrick was at Paris, he was introduced to Mademoiselle Clairon, the greatest actress that France ever produced. In the midst of a large company, assembled to witness the meeting of these favorites of Nature, Mademoiselle Clairon had given, by particular request, some specimens of her art, in her usual pure and elegant style; and Garrick was now politely called upon to exhibit in his turn. The British Roscius, well aware of the disadvantage he must labour under before an audience unacquainted with his language, apologized; but, after some indifferent conversation, artfully introduced a description of an accident which he had observed the preceding day, in his walk through the streets. It was that of a fond father, who, in playing with his only child at a chamber window of a fourth story, had suffered it to slip from his hands, upon the pavement, where it was dashed to pieces. At this part of the description, the actor threw himself into the attitude of the agonized parent when he observed his infant writhing in the pangs of death; and his countenance exhibited all the feelings of the unhappy man. The appeal was irresistible. The company burst into tears. The actress, no longer mistress of herself, fell on his neck; and, following the example of her friends, gave full vent to the most touching emotions of sensibility.

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